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Bachelor of Social Work Student Perceptions of Professional Licensure: Implications for Social Work Education

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Abstract

This exploratory study reports on Bachelor of Social Work students' (BSW) feelings of taking the licensure exam. Following a practicum class presentation on licensing, a student discussion was held. Students were divided into groups to address four questions focused on licensure. Key issues of licensure were explored, including concerns about licensure, how students planned to prepare, concerns over fees, and did they plan to take the exam following the completion of the BSW degree. Findings of the discussion demonstrated student anxiety about passing the exam, not knowing what to study, and the expense of the exam.

Introduction

This exploratory and conceptual paper shifts the focus away from the earlier paper (GlenMaye & Bolin 2015) on the social work educator perceptions of licensure to Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students' perceptions of professional licensure. In the 2015 article, GlenMaye and Bolin found overwhelming support for greater involvement of social work education with the work of ASWB and those at the state level of licensing social workers. Further in this article, social work educators agreed in the original research that licensure was a critical issue for social work educators. However, a disagreement on the question of license pass rates as a valid measure of program quality and student's roles in performance on the exam was found. A critical question that confronts the graduating social work student is, "Will I pass the exam?" Placing blame on students is not beneficial. Once a student is admitted into a social work program their preparation as a social worker is the responsibility of their program,

faculty, and field placement to ensure the student is successful. Student success does not end with the completion of the degree but should be viewed as the knowledge, skills, and ethics needed to pass licensing and to be successful in social work practice following their degree completion.

The proposed conceptual article will explore findings of the earlier article tied to the student perspective, such as what are beginning levels of social work competence versus more advanced levels, licensing focus on urban social work versus rural practice, and licensing preparation. The proposed article will expand into emerging areas of social work regulation such as the shortages of licensed social workers supervisors for advanced practice (Link, 2018), the importance of licensure in the current climate of political and social divisiveness, bias in social work licensing exams (Owens, 2021; Harless, 2021), and mobility of licenses from state to state (Manfre, 2020). Further, with increased focus on mental health, social isolation, homelessness, climate change, does the educational focus of social work programs need to shift to a macro perspective (Hill et al., 2017) and to certification or other forms of regulation for specialized practice in social work (Harless, 2021)?

A current search of the literature found little empirical research on the topic of social work licensure. Several first-person narratives for social workers were found that question social work regulation (Alzubi, 2021). The proposed article will expose gaps in the current literature and make suggestions for future research.

Method

Participants for this exercise included for-

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ty-five social work students who were enrolled in an undergraduate social work practicum class at an urban-serving university in the Midwest. On the day of the discussion, a presentation by a representative of the state licensing board presented and held a discussion on licensing. Then students were placed into groups to answer and discuss four questions based on the discussion. This exploratory study used qualitative analysis to describe the participants' perceptions of taking the Bachelor of Social Work-level licensing exam.

A total of forty-five students took part in this exploratory paper on undergraduate social work student perceptions of licensure. The four questions used in the paper were part of a class discussion on licensing. No demographic characteristics of the students were connected to the discussion to protect the anonymity of the students and their responses. Although, the demographic characteristics of the participants was already known due to enrollment information at the university. Undergraduate social work students in this study identified as 14.2% male and 85.8% female. The median age of students was $Mdn = 23.0$, with a mean age of $M = 26.7$, and a standard deviation of $SD = 8.4$ years. The program census indicates 55.7% reported being Caucasian, 15.8% reported being African American, 17.8% reported being Hispanic, 8% reported being American Indian, and 5.5% reported being multiple races. The sample is like those reported in the CSWE 2019 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States, with 12.4% male, 85.8% female, and most students in BSW programs were below the age of twenty-five. However, the current sample has a higher percentage of Caucasian, white non-Hispanic students than the 48.7%, lower numbers of African American/Black (22.6%), and Hispanic/Latinx (17.8%), but similar numbers of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders reported by CSWE (2019).

Procedures and Design

Qualitative Analysis of the discussion

questions. The student answers for the discussion questions were first organized by the primary investigator. The categories of student answers in item one were organized based on behaviors, self-awareness, communication, and openness to learning. Item two was categorized around knowledge, skills, and awareness (micro, mezzo, and macro techniques). Item three was categorized as simply "yes" or "no" to experiences. Finally, discussion question four was about the students' reactions to the microaggressions they experienced; these were categorized around concepts of avoidance breaching, avoidance, educating others, and the attempts to understand the meaning of the behavior.

Results and Discussion

The results are organized around the four class discussion questions. The results were the responses of the 45 participants from the twelve groups.

Discussion Question One. What specifically are your fears, concerns, and questions about licensure? When responding to the question in the discussion groups there were a total of thirty-six answers. Student answers fell into four categories. Passing: $n = 18$ (50%)

Not Passing the exam, failing, test anxiety (six students answered).

Not passing and the expense associated with retaking the exam (four students answered). Spending years on degree completion and then turning around to spend more money to obtain a license.

Failing the exam on the first try, how many times can you fail the exam before being denied a license, fear of taking multiple times (four students answered).

Overthinking questions and not having enough time.

One's own abilities and knowledge.

Studying: $n = 5$ (14%)

Studying the wrong materials.

Item wording on the exam.

Not being well prepared.

Procrastination in studying

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Not having resources to study properly.

Logistics: n = 13 (36%)

Doing an in-person test over being online.

How long do we have to take the exam - duration? Do you need to go to the testing center to take the exam? Differences between the Licensed Master Social Worker and the Licensed Clinical Specialist Social Worker.

When should students apply to take the exam? Just taking the exam (two students answered). Getting references for the exam plan to move out of state and being worried about taking the exam and transferring a license to another state. Seems intricate and tons of steps to complete the application process (two students answered). Not knowing where to go to take the exam. Readings during the exam.

Student responses to the first discussion question on fears and concerns associated with the license exam produced clear indications of student anxiety. The student responses indicate that social work students have general anxieties over the exam. These anxieties are compounded by the expense of retaking the exam if the student fails to pass. Students do not place as much emphasis on studying as they do on the logistics of taking the exam. Clearing up these logistic questions could be managed through better communication using websites and presentations by local licensing boards or through social work education. Reducing these objective anxieties might reduce overall student stressors and improve student confidence in passing the exam.

Discussion Question Two. How do you plan to prepare to take the licensure exam? Student responses were focused on reliance on self (micro) such as using flash cards, taking practice tests, or studying; group techniques (mezzo) such as study groups; and using professional supports (macro) such as talking to professors, contacting the licensing boards, or reliance on practicum resources. There were a total of 31 answers. Most student answers fell into the area of reliance on self to pass the licensing exam.

Micro level study techniques: n = 26 (84%)

Use of study apps (eight students answered). Using practice exams/quizlets (four students answered). Using flash cards (two students answered). Online study guides (two students answered). Purchasing a study book (three students answered). Utilizing free resources. Study, prep, study everything (four students answered). Meditation and self-care (two students answered).

Mezzo level study techniques: n = 2 (6%)

Studying with groups. Talk with peers who have taken the exam for tips.

Macro level study techniques: n = 3 (10%)

Accessing the licensing website for guidance. Reaching out to school of social work faculty and staff for guidance. Having a good and supportive practicum.

Student responses to how they will study reflect their past experiences with studying. Most answers fall into the category of techniques that are reliant upon self. What is even more interesting is that eight of the 12 groups answered using apps (67%). The use of technology was reflected throughout the students' answers by using online study guides, quizlets, and practice exams. Further, only one group mentioned looking for free resources when the cost of the exam is a major concern for most of the student groups (see responses to question three). Finally, one group brought up self-care techniques and meditation to reduce anxiety. This is noteworthy since half of the groups expressed anxieties over taking the exam. More focus and attention should be given to self-care and anxiety-reducing techniques not only for testing but for social work practice in general.

Discussion Question Three. Do you have concerns about the fees? This was a yes/no answer with the students' comments on their answers. When answering the question, ten groups (83%) stated "yes, they were concerned with the fees." The groups who stated their concerns about licensing fees added comments such as: "It's expensive, especially if you fail (two groups)," "Yes-very expensive, where do these numbers come from," "Why is there a fee every step of the process," "We don't want to pay them but

have to,” “Worried about money with practicum and not enough time,” “Too much for a poor college student,” or “Yes-we will start saving.” The two groups answering no said it was not expensive and suggested that they have noticed the fee and will pay.

Discussion Question Four. Will you take the exam as a BSW? This was a yes/no answer with the students’ comments on their answers. Within the groups and in the discussion, students each reflected a yes or no response with some rationalization of their choice. There were 45 responses.

Yes: n = 18 (40%)

Want the skill base/for the experience of taking the exam (eight students answered).

If the exam is paid for by employment.

Is dependent on employment (two students answered).

Take the exam and work for a while then consider returning to a MSW program (seven students answered).

No: n = 27 (60%)

Will move straight into the MSW program (twenty-five students answered).

Five stated they did not want to spend the money at the BSW level to get a license.

No, too much time, stress, and money (two students answered).

Implications and Discussion

Professional licensure in social work has a controversial history, with debate over the merits of licensure, the validity of license exams, and the relationship between licensure and social work education and curricula (Cherry et al., 1989; Iversen, 1987; Thyer, 2011). Throughout the debate, social work license pass rates have shown a steady decline. In the earlier paper, GlenMaye and Bolin (2015) reported ASWB national pass rates for BSW students were 77.3%; currently ASWB (2021) reports BSW pass rates of 68.5%. With declining BSW pass rates and MSW pass rates being steady, students who wait may be better off continuing their graduate studies to obtain an additional year of practicum and course work. This is the inten-

tion of 60% of the students who took part in the licensing discussion. Thyer (2011) indicates that social work education has ignored the importance of the licensing examination and that pass rates should be tied to social work program effectiveness, even suggesting that pass rates could be made a condition of accreditation. The reliability and validity of the ASWB examinations have been much debated; however, there has been little published research on the exam itself. Thyer (2011) is critical of the lack of information about license pass rates from ASWB and from schools of social work.

This study explores BSW students’ perceptions of taking the licensing exam, but also addresses the issue of structure and personal issues that may place students under additional stressors. The trend of decreasing pass (ASWB, 2021) rates and issues students have with the process of licensure are equally important and pressing. These issues raise questions for a sustainable future for social work education and the profession. There is, however, little empirical research on license exam issues and the relationship of licensure to social work education.

Faculty beliefs from an earlier study demonstrate vastly different perspectives than what students in this study have expressed about licensure at the BSW level. Faculty members expressed concerns about whether the students were intellectually ready for the test. There were fears expressed that the rigors of the program were lower and thus students were not equipped to take the exam. Standards that allow students into the social work program are not a sufficient means for gatekeeping of social work programs. A further concern of faculty was if the test content mirrored the CSWE standards and if the curriculum that was taught sufficiently prepared students for the licensure exam. Students did not seem to express concerns about the curriculum or if they had been taught what they needed to know to pass the exam. Instead, students’ concerns centered more on the expense of the exam and the process of the actual exam. The lo-

gistics of the exam and being unsure of what the actual day of the exam would look like seemed to be paramount for them. In addition, students shouldered the responsibility of passing the exam. They spoke of their own personal plan and ideas of how they would prepare themselves for the exam, and those were much more individually focused than getting ready to take the exam as a collective group.

Conclusion

Bachelor-level social work students are under enormous pressure to perform in classes, fulfill practicum expectations during a time of pandemic, and pass the licensing exam. Within the context of decreasing pass rates for the BSW student, staying in school, taking the exam for practice, and getting additional practicum experiences are reasonable responses to their current situations. Students were focused on pragmatic issues when it came to licensure. More specifically, they were concerned about the cost of licensure, their ability to pass the licensing exam, and the expense incurred if they were to fail and needed to retake the licensure exam an additional time. Students personally shouldered the responsibility of passing the licensure, with many of them expressing their individual-based plans to prepare for the licensure exam including using apps, taking practice exams, and reading study manuals. Finally, students in this study were not focused on issues of license mobility, bias in the exams, faculty licensure, or other structural and policy issues. Students just seem to want to complete their education, take the exam, pass the exam, and become licensed, practicing social workers.

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